



**PUBLIC HEARING
CAPITAL BUDGET REQUEST
FISCAL YEAR 2007**

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**Council Committee on
Education, Libraries and Recreation**

TESTIMONY

District of Columbia Public Library

Richard H. Levy, DC Public Library Trustee, Facilities Committee Chair

Good morning Chairman Patterson and members of the Committee. My name is Richard Levy and I am a Trustee of DC Public Library and Chair of its Facilities Committee. Before I begin my testimony I want to acknowledge the superb leadership that John Hill has provided to the Library's Board of Trustees as its President. Unfortunately, due to a prior commitment, John is out of town and thus unable to join us today. I would also like to recognize Francis Buckley, the Library's interim director, who came out of retirement to help us evaluate the condition and needs of the Library system so that we could begin to set it on a course of needed transformation.

Two and a half years ago, Mayor Williams asked John and me to create a roadmap for the transformation and re-building of our neglected public libraries.

As serendipity would have it, I was in Los Angeles a couple of weeks later and had the opportunity to meet Susan Kent, the director of LA's public libraries. She was well acquainted with the problems facing DCPL, why the previous director left DCPL for Portland and the difficulties we would face in attracting a director who could lead us out of the past and into the 21st century. Her evaluation was very straight forward: In the world of public libraries DCPL was considered to be near bottom, saddled with a dysfunctional board of trustees, declining resources, dated facilities and collections, antiquated technology, and no signs of vision or political will to make the changes necessary to bring it up to day, much less into the future. She prophetically added that unless DC was able to demonstratively address these issues it would be virtually impossible to attract the talent necessary to lead this transformation. There's nothing like a long odds challenge to get our blood flowing, so how could John and I, both DC natives, say no to the Mayor.

It is two years since John and I were confirmed as Trustees, and while it is not yet evident in the appearance of our libraries, tremendous work has been done to develop a vision and lay the groundwork for a complete transformation of our public library system. Today we have a unified and hardworking Board of Trustees that share a vision, possess the determination to deliver attractive and well maintained state-of-the-art libraries, and provide quality customer service to residents in every neighborhood across the city.

A little over a year ago, with the support of the City Council, the Mayor launched his Blue Ribbon Task Force for the Transformation of the DC Public Library System. In doing so he brought together some major figures from the world of libraries (Susan Kent, Vartan Gregorian, Deana Marcum) and education (Martha Hale, Father Leo O'Donovan, Elaine Wolfensohn) along with community activists and business and civic leaders (Charles Overby, Ralph Davison, Terry Golden, City Council Chair Linda Cropp, Councilmember Kathy Patterson, Terry Lynch & Miles Steele, and Joslyn Williams). The Task Force heard from leading experts and library staff, who helped identified programmatic weaknesses and physical deficiencies of our library facilities. We also heard from some of the most successful library directors and specialists involved in rebuilding other library systems. Members of the Task Force also visited some of the nation's public library success stories in cities such as Los Angeles, Miami-Dade, Nashville, Phoenix, Seattle and Salt Lake City.

The culmination of this work produced draft ideas and concepts on how to transform our library system. At the Citizen Summit in November where the Task Force findings were presented, citizen's shared their priorities, expressing a strong desire for libraries to become centers of community life and to include public spaces for a range of activities. DC Public Libraries also held 10 public listening sessions across the city earlier this year, where we learned that residents are dissatisfied with the current state of their libraries. They want libraries that are inviting and safe. They want deeper, broader and more current

collections, more and better computers and training, spaces for community meetings, a collection of District government records, and a locally based coffee shop. We couldn't agree more.

In the words of Vartan Gregorian, the legendary former president of NYPL and a member of the Task Force, the bad news about the current condition of DCPL is also the good news: the system is so broken that it is not a question of marginal change; rather, it presents the opportunity to create *the* leading 21st century public library system, leapfrogging over every other system in the country. We see this as both our opportunity and our charge.

On behalf of the Blue Ribbon Task Force and the Library Board of Trustees, I come before you to share a bold vision for creating a 21st Century library system:

- To transform neighborhood libraries into activity magnets and true community and cultural treasures, where people of all ages and backgrounds are drawn to explore, to learn and share;
- To create a state-of-the-art, 21st Century library system, where innovative programs and leading technology give our residents the tools for the new knowledge-based economy; and
- To provide safe and supportive places and exciting programs that encourage children to discover the love of learning and reading and assist adults who want to gain greater literacy skills.

To get there, we must physically design our libraries into centers of community life...into places that bridge the digital divide, ensuring that everyone in every

neighborhood is connected to the world of knowledge. And given the economic and educational disparities so present in our city, this makes the role of public libraries even more relevant today than 30 years ago.

To get there, we must reconfigure our libraries into literacy hubs and to build them in a way that that entices children off the streets and into our safe havens after school.

And finally, it means that libraries are to be designed as neighborhood centers in the true meaning of the word – areas for neighborhood-based exhibitions, community meetings, and other spaces to foster community interaction. And if planned and designed well, libraries have the potential to help stimulate neighborhood development.

Below are two photographs of a neighborhood branch in Los Angeles. This branch replaced a vacant car lot and created new opportunities for residents to access long-sought after services. The Los Angeles Public Library director and staff worked closely with residents to design the physical facility and develop the programs inside. For our neighborhood branches, working with residents will be crucial in planning each library modernization.

Recognizing the tremendous opportunity to realize this bold vision for our neighborhoods, Mayor Williams has proposed a \$94.5 million increase in this capital budget to invest in our public library system. This is a clear affirmation by the Mayor of the important role libraries can – and must – play in neighborhood life. During this six-year period, capital funds will completely modernize or rehabilitate 15 neighborhood branches across the city and at the same time fund the planning and design for seven more.

As we embark on a major initiative to create state-of-the-art branch libraries, we remain focused on building a new, iconic central library. A new central library will serve as the administrative, technological and collections hub to all neighborhood branches. Today, our existing MLK Library provides only minimal support of this kind to our branches. We recognize that the proposition of building a new central library is one that people have strong opinions about. Yet, we believe that in the midst of the city's economic boom, perhaps nothing is more meaningful than creating a truly inviting public space for Washingtonians and visitors. It will be *the place* where residents living in the eastern and western halves of the city will come together to learn, to share, and to experience.

As demonstrated by other cities such as Salt Lake City, as shown in the images before you today, a well designed central library can double, if not triple, its patronage as well as the patronage of its branches.

The budget now before you includes new financing streams that would allow us to build a new central library with minimal funds from the District's CIP. We believe that leveraging other funding sources will allow us to devote crucial capital funds to transform our neighborhood libraries. President Bush has also earmarked \$30 million dollars in his budget for the DC's Public Libraries and we intend to use less than half of these funds towards our new central library. Yet, clearly with this gift, the Federal government will be a crucial partner in realizing this vision.

In addition to the Federal government, we have amassed other crucial partners and partnerships over the last several years. Leading library directors including Susan Kent, Dona Nicely of Nashville, Ray Santiago of Miami-Dade and Nancy Testman of Salt Lake City continue to provide their support and advice, Deana Marcum, Associate Director of the Library of Congress has offered to provide

training for our staff and technological guidance, and we anticipate raising \$40 million dollars through private fundraising efforts.

This outpouring of support can only take us so far, however. DC Public Libraries must organize itself to implement this vision. That will include the planning, design and oversight of the construction of almost every neighborhood branch and a new central library over the next 10 years. In drawing lessons from other cities, we learned that modernizing the entire library system is not only plausible; it's do-able. And it begins with a strong leader. Although Fran has decided to return to retirement, we are well into the process of selecting a permanent director from a pool of stellar candidates. From this pool, we will select a visionary, hard-working director with experience in transforming library systems of this size and caliber.

From other cities we also learned the importance of a strong internal facilities team – a team that oversees all aspects of each library modernization and manages a strong financial system. While the Board deeply appreciates the level of public support that this budget may provide, we in return pledge that these critical resources will be used in an accountable, efficient, transparent, and ultimately transformative way.

Before Fran provides you with more details on how DC Public Libraries will implement this blueprint for change, I do want to summarize one of our original tasks as a Board and as part of the Blue Ribbon Task Force: to create a roadmap for creating a truly state-of-the-art library system for the Nation's Capital.

In summary, it's a bold, forward-looking vision, a strong leader at the helm, a strong facilities team with strong financial systems in place, solid partners and partnerships, and crucial capital funds. With your support of the Capital budget,

DC Public Libraries will be aligned to create the 21st Century Library system
District residents want and deserve. Thank you.